

The Information Status of English *If*-clauses in Natural Discourse*

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1. Introduction

Haiman (1978) once argued that conditionals are uniformly defined as topics. His argument had to suffer from some substantial problems both empirically and theoretically. Despite these problems, his paper was a trailblazing research that opened up the path for the study of conditionals from a discourse point of view. The present paper studies conditionals from a particular aspect of discourse functional perspective by analyzing the information structure of conditional sentences in natural discourse. Ford and Thompson (1986) studied the discourse function of conditionals in the similar vein through a corpus-based research. This paper also attempts to understand the discourse function of conditionals, but it does it under a rather different standpoint, under the framework of the so-called GIVEN-NEW taxonomy as presented in Prince (1992).

In this paper, we focus on the definition of topic as an entity that represents the GIVEN or OLD information to be checked against the information in the preceding linguistic context. By analyzing the data of the English *if*-clauses in natural discourse both in oral and written contexts, we present sufficient evidence to show that conditionals are not simply topics (GIVEN information). It is revealed that the *if*-clauses

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should be viewed as carrying the NEW or INFERRABLE information as well as the GIVEN information (in the sense defined in Prince (1992)). Along with these findings, we observe that the speaker's choice of clause order in English conditionals is closely related to the information status of the conditional antecedent in a local discourse context. In particular, we observe that the speaker is motivated to shift the conditional antecedent to the final position only in a limited context where it is not inferentially linked to the preceding context. Then we argue that this motivation stems from the underlying discourse principle of putting something GIVEN or INFERRABLE before introducing something NEW for a smooth transition of discourse flow.

The paper proceeds in the following fashion. In the immediately following section 2, we briefly review Haiman's (1978) claim and reveal the shortcomings of his argument. Then, as a theoretical background for subsequent discussion, we briefly sketch the main ideas in the GIVEN-NEW taxonomy as presented in Prince (1992). In section 3, we analyze the information status of the English *if*-clauses in natural discourse by discussing a wide range of corpus data, both written and spoken. In section 4, in connection with the findings in section 3, we discuss the interaction between the information status of conditionals and the clause order. We attempt to explain under a general discourse principle why the speaker is sometimes motivated to shift the conditional antecedent to the final position in English. Finally, in section 5, we summarize the main findings and arguments in the paper and make some closing remarks.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Two notions of TOPIC and Haiman (1978)

The notion of TOPIC has been widely used in the field of linguistics, but its definition is far from being a settled issue. Amid all different kinds of approaches to the notion of TOPIC, there are basically two approaches with which most linguists agree to define its core concept. One is to define it as an entity that expresses what the sentence is about, as in the definition by Reinhart (1982 : 55). The other is to define

it as an entity that represents the GIVEN or OLD information, as in the definitions by Kuno (1972), Chafe (1976), Prince (1981) and Gundel (1985). The basic difference between these two approaches is that while the former view presents the topic-hood as a relation between an argument and a proposition relative to a context, the latter portrays it as a property of the referent denoted by a linguistic expression in the flow of discourse.

Haiman (1978) claimed that conditionals are uniformly defined as topics. He argued that all *if*-clauses in (1) below share a common meaning as the topics of the sentences.

- (1) a. If Max comes, we'll play poker.
- b. If ice is left in the sun, it melts.
- c. If you are so smart, why aren't you rich?
- d. There's food in the fridge, if you're hungry. Haiman (1978 : 564)

He led to this argument without discussing any data of conditionals in actual discourse context. It is rather surprising to find that Haiman's main source of data came from some constructed examples of single sentences that are taken out of utterance context, considering that the main focus of his research is a comparison of conditionals with such an inherently discourse-bound notion as topics.

As it turns out, Haiman's position on the definition of topics as related to his uniform definition of conditionals is not clear. The definition of topic Haiman seems to have in mind in (1) above is the definition of topic in the sense of ABOUTNESS. However, in the later stage, he clearly came up with the definition of topic as a discourse-bound entity as in (2).

- (2) The topic represents an entity whose existence is agreed upon by the speaker and his audience. As such, it constitutes the framework which has been selected for the following discourse. Haiman (1978 : 58)

Haiman then compared this definition of topic with his characterized definition of conditionals as in (3) and this led him to the conclusion that conditionals are topics.

- (3) A conditional clause is (perhaps only hypothetically) a part of the knowledge shared by the speaker and his listener. As such, it constitutes the framework which has been selected for the following discourse. Haiman (1978 : 56)

The definition of topic Haiman has in mind here is obviously the definition of topic as given or old information (specifically as SHARED KNOWLEDGE). In the following discussions, we show that Haiman's uniform definition of conditionals as topics cannot be maintained in both definitions of topic.

First, Akatsuka (1986 : 340) pointed out a general problem in characterizing the conditionals as given (shared knowledge). She noted that the inner world of consciousness of other people belongs to unsharable knowledge, but such things are often conditionalized as in (4).

- (4) (A mother and her son are waiting for the bus on a wintry day.
The son is trembling in the cold wind:)
a. Son: Mommy, I'm so cold.
b. Mother: Poor thing! If you're so cold, put on my shawl.
(She puts her shawl around his shoulders.) Akatsuka (1986 : 341)

According to Akatsuka, it is impossible for anyone to enter other people's minds and directly experience their feelings, emotions or beliefs, and what is registered in their mind is only indirectly accessible to us as 'information' through observations of external evidence. Following her points, we find it hard to view the content of the *if*-clause in (4) as shared knowledge. For the mother, its content is not shared knowledge with her son, but a newly-learned information as she just realizes it at the moment of utterance.

We observe that the so-called SPEECH ACT CONDITIONALS as defined in Van der Auwera (1986) are hard to view as given as shared knowledge. This type of conditional is characterized by the fact that the antecedent contains a (relevance) condition for the speech act expressed in the consequent. Consider (5) below.

(5) A: Did you finish the Physics paper?

B: If I tell you the truth, I didn't even start it yet.

Notice in (5) that the *if*-clause is used to express the speaker's one-sided felicity condition on his/her expression of utterance (speech act) in the consequent, independent of the hearer's sharing of its content in the previous context. For this reason, the content of this *if*-clause is hard to view as carrying shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.¹

Second, let us see now whether we can save Haiman's argument by considering the other definition of topic; that is, in the sense of ABOUTNESS. Farkas and Sugioka (1983) identified the following type of *if*-clauses in (6) below as restrictive *if*-clauses in English.

(6) a. Cats are intelligent when/if they have blue eyes.

b. Cats which have blue eyes are intelligent.

This type of conditional clause is typically found with generic NP subjects and it is characterized by the interchangeability with *when* as shown in (6)a. The function of this *if*-clause is to restrict the domain of the subject NP denotation and one of the important semantic characteristics of this type of conditional sentence is that it is paraphrasable by restrictive relatives as in (6)b. In the conditional sentence of the pattern in (6)a, the whole sentence is about the topic expression '*Cats*' and the *if*-clause restricts the domain of denotation of this topic expression. In this semantic structure, it is hard to claim that (6)a is about the conditional antecedent '*if they have blue eyes*.'

Let us consider another type of conditional context. Reilly (1986 : 313) identified the following type of conditional in (7) as GENERIC CONDITIONAL and observed that it is typically used to describe a rule or to predict a law-like relationship between two events.

1. This example clearly illustrates that conditionals can indeed convey the new information. This point will be understood more clearly later in the upcoming section 3.3, where we discuss the information status of the conditional clause with a more refined definition of 'GIVEN-NEW' taxonomy as defined in Prince (1992).

(7) (pouring water on cement:)

If you put water on it, it sparkles.

Reilly (1986 : 313)

(7) describes a co-occurrence relation between pouring water and the resultant sparkling. In this kind of context, the *if*-clause is simply a part of stating this regular co-occurrence relation as a condition for a rule-like consequence. Notice in (7) above that there is no overt topic expression present in the conditional sentence. The topic is situationally understood between the speaker and the hearer at a discourse site as the action of pouring water on cement is taking place. In this context, (7) provides a new information about this topic and this *if*-clause is simply a part of this new information. It is hard to state that the whole sentence (7) is about the content of this *if*-clause '*If you put water on it*.' The discussion of the data in (6) and (7) so far proves that the uniform definition of conditionals as topics in the sense of ABOUTNESS cannot be maintained, either.

In this section, we observed that Haiman's (1978) uniform definition of conditionals as topics cannot be maintained in both definitions of topichood. This suggests that we need to characterize the discourse function of conditionals in a different way. His research, however, deserves credit for opening up the venue for us to turn our attention to the research of information structure of complex sentences, conditionals in particular. In the following section, we propose to study the conditionals in discourse by analyzing their information status based on the so-called GIVEN-NEW taxonomy in the literature.

2.2. The GIVEN-NEW taxonomy and Prince (1992)

In the tradition of defining the notion of TOPIC in the flow of discourse, the study of the information status of a discourse entity has been one of the central questions addressed in the field of discourse analysis. This study has been characterized as what they often call the issue of GIVEN-NEW taxonomy. The terms GIVEN/OLD and NEW information have meant a variety of things in the literature over the years. Prince (1992) presented a succinct account of different notions of 'GIVEN-NEW' information. Among them, there are two notions that are crucially

relevant for the current discussion. One is the definition of 'GIVEN-NEW' information in the *hearer's head*. The other is the definition of 'GIVEN-NEW' information in the *discourse model*. According to Prince (1992:302), in the former notion, a discourse entity is considered given or new depending on the speaker's belief about the hearer's belief, whereas in the latter notion what is crucial is whether or not that discourse entity was evoked in the previous discourse.

Let us discuss some concrete examples from Prince (1992 : 303) to clearly understand these two definitions. Consider (8) below.

- (8) a. I'm waiting for it to be noon so I can call *Sandy Thompson*.
- b. Why are you trying to get in touch with *Sandy Thompson*?

Prince (1992) observed that the same discourse entity *Sandy Thompson* carries two different kinds of information in (8) above. When the speaker initiates a discourse by uttering (8)a to a colleague, for instance, s/he assumes that this colleague already has a mental entity with the attribute of having the name of *Sandy Thompson*. Thus, this entity in (8)a should be viewed as discourse-new but hearer-old. However, the same entity should be viewed as discourse-old and hearer-old as in (8)b. Notice in (8)b that *Sandy Thompson* was already evoked in the previous discourse in (8)a and thus it should be discourse-old. It is also hearer-old since the speaker can assume that the hearer knows this entity as an old information.

Besides these two definitions of 'GIVEN-NEW' taxonomy, Prince (1992) introduced another term to capture the discourse entity which cannot be completely given or new from the perspectives of two definitions. According to Prince (1992 : 304), when a speaker evokes some entity in the discourse, it is often the case that s/he assumes that the hearer can infer the (discourse) existence of certain other entities via the speaker's logical reasoning or by some inferential links.

Consider (9) from Prince (1992 : 305).

- (9) a. He passed by the door of the Bastille and *the door* was painted purple.
- b. He passed by the Bastille and *the door* was painted purple.

Prince observed that in (9)a the italicized NP *the door* was evoked in the previous discourse; hence it is discourse-old. However, in (9)b, it was not evoked in the previous discourse and thus cannot be viewed as discourse-old. However, this door is treated as though it were already known to the hearer, as signaled by the use of definite article *the*. The point is that it is inferentially related, via a salient set relation, to an entity already evoked in the prior discourse. In particular, every speaker can assume that once the entity *Bastille* (a prison) is evoked in the discourse, one can think of it having a door. Thus, we can attach the definite article as an entity that is not totally new but somehow related and linked to the previous discourse context. Prince called this kind of discourse entity as the INFERRABLE entity.

3. The Information Status of the *If*-clauses in Natural Discourse

3.1. Conditionals as carrying the GIVEN information

One of the most common ways in which a conditional clause is linked to the preceding context is that the conditional clause is used to repeat an earlier claim as a hypothetical possibility. Akatsuka (1985 : 628) noted a context where the antecedent of a conditional expresses information which the speaker has just received from his interlocutor at a discourse site. Consider (10) below.

(10) A: Ken says he lived in Japan when he was a kid.

B: Gee. If he lived in Japan when he was a kid, why doesn't he
have an accent? Akatsuka (1985 : 628)

Akatsuka observed that the *if*-clause in (10) expresses what she called the *newly-learned information* that has just entered the consciousness of the speaker at the discourse site. From the perspective of the GIVEN-NEW taxonomy in the definition of Prince (1992), the *if*-clause in (10) should be viewed as discourse-old and hearer-old as well, since its content directly quotes what the hearer said and it was evoked in the previous discourse.

The use of a conditional to directly repeat what was evoked earlier in

the previous discourse as a discourse-old entity is very commonly found in everyday discourse.² The speaker often directly quotes what the hearer utters as his/her belief or opinion and assumes it to be true as a hypothesis as in (11).

- (11) (A and B are talking about who is the best quarterback in the NFL this year:)
 A: I think Brett Favre is still the best QB in the NFL today.
 B: *If Brett Favre is the best QB*, why did he fail to lead his team to the Super Bowl this year?
 (QB: quarterback, NFL: National Football League)

Notice in (11) that the *if*-clause is used to quote the hearer's belief as a conditional antecedent. In this context, this *if*-clause is viewed to carry the discourse-old and hearer-old information. Notice that the content of the *if*-clause was evoked in the previous discourse and the speaker surely knows it is in the hearer's consciousness because it was uttered by the hearer.

Now let us consider a slightly different context. Consider (12) below.

- (12) (A and B open the refrigerator door and find some beer:)
 A: If there is some beer, we have to drink some.
 B: Absolutely!

2. The fact that Korean reserves a particular form of conditional marker, *-tamyen*, instead of the prototypical conditional marker, *-myen*, for this kind of conditional context strongly confirms that it is one of the most prevailing discourse contexts of conditionals in natural language. Notice in (1) below that *-tamyen* is used to directly quote what the speaker A said. In this kind of conditional context, *-tamyen* is favored over *-myen* for a rhetoric reason to express the speaker's challenging attitude against the addressee's statement.

- (1) a. A: *Chelswu-ka ttokttokha-n-kes kath-a*
 Chelswu-NOM smart-seem to be-DEC
 'I think Chelswu is smart.'
 b. B: *Chelswu-ka ttokttokha-tamyen(#myen)* way
 Chelswu-NOM be smart-if why
 tayhak-ey-nun mos ka-ss-ni
 college-to-TOP not go-PAST-Q
 'If Chelswu is smart, why did he fail to go to college?'

Refer to Lee, C-B (2000) for a variety of speaker attitudes the conditional marker *-tamyen* expresses in its felicitous contexts and the systematic division of labor between the *-tamyen* conditionals and the *-myen* conditionals.

Akatsuka (1985) observed that what the speaker just realizes at a discourse site can be subject to be marked by the conditional antecedent and what she called the speaker attitude of SUDDEN REALIZATION is expressed by it. In this context, what the speaker connotes in using the *if*-clause in the 'If S1, S2' structure is characterized by the speaker attitude of 'I just realize S1.' In particular, what the speaker intends to say by uttering the conditional sentence in (12) above is something like 'I just realize that there is some beer in the refrigerator. I am so happy to find some, so we should enjoy drinking some.' In this context, notice that the information status of the *if*-clause should be discourse-new because it was never evoked in the previous discourse, but hearer-old because the speaker can assume that its content is in the consciousness of the hearer at the moment of utterance. Thus, the information status of this *if*-clause is given only in one notion of 'GIVEN'; that is, in the hearer's head.

3.2. Conditionals as carrying the INFERRABLE information

We have seen the data where the *if*-clauses carry the 'GIVEN' information at least in one notion of 'GIVEN.' Now, we find that in many instances of conditionals, they cannot be viewed as 'GIVEN' in either definitions. Instead, we observe that the information status of the *if*-clauses in these contexts is best viewed to carry what Prince (1992) called the INFERRABLE information in the sense that the hearer can infer the (discourse) existence of certain other entities by an inferential link to the preceding context. We will further notice that this inferential link can be either through various forms of logical reasoning or through the bridge of inferential meaning implicitly created by the speaker in a given context, such as conversational implicature.

3.2.1. Salient set relation (X. If a, c. If b, d.), [X={a, b}]

Schiffrin (1992:187) observed that one of the important discourse functions of conditionals is that when questions are evoked in the previous discourse, the options are specified through conditionals. This kind of discourse function by the English *if*-clause is frequently observed in everyday discourse. Consider (13).

(13) A: I wonder what the weather is going to be like tomorrow. What do you think we should do tomorrow?

B: If it's sunny, let's go to the beach, and if it rains, let's rent some movie tapes and watch them at home.

Notice in (13) above that the propositional contents of two *if*-clauses describe two possible options for the evoked question 'What's the weather going to be like tomorrow?' The information status of each *if*-clause in this context is not completely given or new in the sense that it can be inferred by a kind of logical reasoning; that is, a salient set relation (a set of two relevant answers, {a,b}, connected to the question X evoked in the previous discourse). I claim that this use of a conditional antecedent is best viewed to carry the INFERRABLE information in the definition of Prince (1992).

This notion of salient set relation turns out to be frequently observed in conditionals used in written discourses, too. Let us consider one such example from the New Testament as in (14).³

(14) (From New Testament: Matthew 18 : 15)

If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone, between your two selves. *If he listens to you*, you have won back your brother. *If he does not listen*, take one or two others along with you.

Observe in (14) that two *if*-clauses provide a pair of contrastive hypothetical options for the command 'go and have it out with him alone, between your two selves.' The person is either expected to listen to one's persuasion or refuse to do so. The content of each *if*-clause illustrates one of these two possible situations. In this context, the information status of each *if*-clause is viewed to carry the INFERRABLE information since its content is inferentially linked to the preceding command through a salient set relation (a set of two relevant answers exhausts the possible world that is expected to occur after the command evoked in the previous discourse).

3. All the examples from the New Testament in this paper are quoted from the text, *The New Jerusalem Bible*. 1998. New York: Double Day publishing company.

3.2.2. Exemplification (Generalization X. If x, y.) [x is an instance/example of X.]

Another important discourse function of conditionals is to give an example as one of many possible options from a general remark in the preceding context. The *if*-clause is frequently observed to illustrate a possible example for a generalized comment in the preceding context. Consider (15).

- (15) Everyone needs to take some time off. If I have free time during the summer, I travel to see a beautiful resort with my family.

Notice in (15) above that the *if*-clause serves to present a possible instance of the generalization expressed in the previous discourse. The content of the *if*-clause above describes a possible example of taking some time off. The entire conditional sentence describes a particular example showing what one does when one takes some time off. In this context, the content of the *if*-clause can be also viewed to carry the INFERRABLE information because it can be readily inferred by the hearer by the generalization- exemplification link.

3.2.3. Offering a contrast to an earlier claim (X. If-X, Y.)

Another common way in which conditionals are linked to the preceding context is the case of the conditional antecedent negating an earlier statement or argument as a hypothetical situation. This way of using the conditional antecedent is very frequently observed in everyday discourse. Consider (16) below.

- (16) I am sure \$20 will be enough. If \$20 is not enough, please call me when you get there.

Observe in (16) that the *if*-clause is used to describe an opposite situation to an earlier expectation by the speaker. One can readily imagine that an earlier expectation or belief can be negated or an opposite reality can occur. In this context, the speaker assumes that the hearer can infer, by a logical reasoning, a hypothetical situation which is contrastive to his/her earlier belief or expectation. Thus, the content

of the *if*-clause can be also viewed to carry the INFERRABLE information.

3.2.4. Linked to what an earlier claim conversationally implicates.

In the examples of (13) through (16) so far, the content of the *if*-clause is inferentially linked directly to some evoked entity or expression in the preceding discourse by way of some kind of logical reasoning. However, there are some instances of conditional contexts where we cannot think of an evoked entity or expression in the previous discourse that creates this kind of inferential link and furthermore the kind of logical reasoning is not clear. Consider (17) below.

(17) A: How are you doing these days?

B: Well. I have so many things to do these days.

If I can afford some free time, I would like to visit your place some time.

In (17), the content of the *if*-clause is not inferentially linked to any overt entity evoked in the preceding discourse. Rather, what seems to connect this *if*-clause to the preceding context seems to be a kind of indirect inferential link by the conversational implicature. Notice that by saying 'I have so many things to do' the speaker conversationally implicates to the hearer 'I don't have much free time.' The *if*-clause here describes a possible option contrastive to this implicature. In this situation, notice that this logical link was possible due to the establishment of this conversational implicature. Considering that the hearer can infer the content of the *if*-clause through this indirect inferential link, we argue that this use of the *if*-clause can be viewed as carrying the INFERRABLE information as well.⁴

4. Some may argue that this notion of INFERRABLE by Prince (1992) is a vague notion in the sense that when some process of inference is involved, there seems to be no clear limit in what kind of inferential relation can be viewed to create an INFERRABLE entity in a given context. I admit that the definition of INFERRABLE information is not crystal clear. I believe, however, that the advantage of having this notion available as part of the whole GIVEN-NEW taxonomy outweighs the disadvantage of its definition being somewhat vague. As presented throughout this section, this notion of INFERRABLE turns out to be very useful in capturing the kind of information connectivity between the

3.3. Conditionals as carrying the NEW information

We have seen, so far, the examples of conditionals as carrying either GIVEN information or INFERRABLE information. In this section, we observe that conditionals can sometimes carry new information as well.

Let us revisit what Akatsuka (1985) called the newly-learned information context as our starting point. Consider (18) below.

- (18) (Visiting his friend in the hospital, the speaker says to himself)
If he's so happy to see me, I should have come earlier.

Akatsuka (1985 : 630)

Akatsuka (1985) observed that the antecedent in a conditional sentence in (18) above expresses the speaker's attitude of SURPRISE or SUDDEN REALIZATION that something totally unexpected has happened. Akatsuka further noted that what the speaker connotes in using the *if*-clause in '*if* S1, S2' is 'I didn't know S1 until now!'. This information is not heard or obtained from the hearer or some other person at a discourse site but rather it describes the speaker's own feeling or opinion that sprang up at a given discourse site. Then, it is natural for such an information to be NEW in the definition of the hearer's head because the speaker can never assume that his/her own description of feeling can be shared or known to the hearer when it is uttered. Thus, from the perspective of the GIVEN-NEW taxonomy, the *if*-clause in (18) should be viewed as both discourse-new and hearer-new, since it was never evoked in the previous discourse and its content cannot be viewed to be in the consciousness of the hearer when the speaker uttered it.

There are two other common instances where the conditional antecedent is viewed as carrying the information that is both discourse-new and hearer-new. One is the SPEECH ACT CONDITIONAL context we discussed briefly in section 2 earlier. Consider (19) below.

if-clauses and the entities evoked in the preceding context in a local discourse context where the speaker's belief interacts with the consciousness of the addressee.

- (19) a. If I can speak frankly, he doesn't have a chance.
 b. Open the window, if I may ask you to.

Van der Auwera (1986 : 199)

Van der Auwera referred to the above type of conditionals as *SPEECH ACT CONDITIONALS* in that they are truly conditional speech acts, i.e., *if p, q* speech acts that are not about any conditional relation between *p* and *q*, but represent *p* as a condition for a speech act about *q*. This type of conditional has been characterized in the traditional descriptive grammar of English (e.g. Quirk et al (1985)) as an idiomatic type of conditional which is used as a kind of commentative device or to add a politeness expression.⁵

Turning our attention to the main stream of our discussion, it is obvious that the above type of *if*-clause should be viewed both discourse-new and hearer-new. Notice that this *if*-clause was never evoked in the previous discourse and cannot be viewed as shared by the hearer at the time of utterance. The *if*-clause here was used to express the speaker's one-side felicity condition on his/her expression of utterance (speech act) in the consequent clause independent of the hearer's sharing of its content.

Another type of conditional context where we observe the conditional antecedent carry the *NEW* information is the *GENERIC CONDITIONAL* context we discussed briefly in section 2 earlier. According to Reilly (1986:313), the *GENERIC CONDITIONAL* sentences are typically used to describe a rule or to predict a law-like relationship between two events. In everyday discourse context, we can easily find many examples of *GENERIC CONDITIONALS*. Consider (20).

5. Iatridou (1990 : 50) discussed this type of conditionals as a separate type in English by identifying it with a different name from Van der Auwera (1986). She called this type of conditional as *RELEVANCE* conditionals because the conditional antecedent of this type does not specify the condition for the truth of *q* in the 'If *p, q*' structure, but rather specifies the circumstances in which the consequent is relevant. Her discussion provides us with some further insight in understanding the characteristics of this conditional context. She further observed that these conditionals cannot be captured if we directly adopt the paraphrase 'in any circumstances in which *p, q*.' For instance, we find that the paraphrase of (1)b below is really absurd. (1)c seems to be a more probable paraphrase as observed by Iatridou (1990).

- (1) a. If you want to know, 4 isn't a prime number.
 b. #In any circumstance in which you want to know, 4 isn't a prime number.
 c. In any circumstance in which you want to know, it is relevant/appropriate that 4 isn't a prime number.

(20) (A and B are examining an electric appliance:)

A: How do I turn this on?

B: If you push this button, the power comes on.

Notice in (20) that the *if*-clause functions simply as part of stating a co-occurrence relation between the pushing of a button and the resultant power-on of an electric appliance. In this situation, the information status of this *if*-clause should be viewed discourse-new and hearer-new. First, notice that the content described in the *if*-clause was never evoked in the previous context. Second, the speaker cannot assume that the hearer already knows the content of the *if*-clause at the time of utterance. It was just provided to the hearer's head by the speaker at a discourse site as NEW information.

4. Clause Order in English Conditionals

The discussion so far shows that the information status of conditionals is not uniformly GIVEN as predicted by Haiman (1978) but rather quite diverse by carrying various kinds of information in the dynamic domain of discourse context. We have observed a wide range of data of conditionals in discourse where they carry the NEW or INFERRABLE information as well as the GIVEN information. In the examples where conditionals carry the INFERRABLE information, we could observe a variety of inferential links at work to connect the content of the conditional clause to the preceding context.

In this section, we observe that the presence or absence of this inferential link in a local conditional discourse context is closely related to the speaker's choice of clause order in conditionals.

4.1. Ford and Thompson (1986)

Ford and Thompson (1986) reported in their corpus-based study that 23% of the examples of conditionals in written English are final conditional clauses and the ratio of final conditional clauses is slightly less in spoken English (about 18%). This shows that both in written and spoken English, initial conditional clauses outnumber final conditional clauses by

a ratio of about three to one.⁶

The question arises here as to why even this small percentage of conditional clauses should occur in final position; that is, what motivates the speakers of English to choose the marked clause order over the predominant clause order? Ford and Thompson (1986) argued that discourse and grammatical factors seem to combine to make the speaker to choose to shift the conditional clause to the final position.

In this study, we focus on the discourse factors directly relevant to our discussion. Ford and Thompson (1986 : 361) argued that conditionals seem to be used when other factors are at work in the discourse to make the shared background function less important than such considerations as incorporation of other clause types, participant types, participant tracking, comparative focus on other elements, or clause length. For instance, they argued that written English tends to introduce *new, heavy or compared* NPs in the main clause instead of in the dependent clause. Consider one of their examples in (21)

- (21) Collective fear stimulates herd instinct, and tends to produce ferocity towards those who are not regarded as members of the herd. So it was in the French Revolution, when dread of foreign armies produced the reign of terror. The Soviet government would have been less fierce, *if* it had met with less hostility in its first year.
Ford and Thompson (1986 : 361)

6. Lee, C-B (2000 : 192) reported that unlike English, the option of placing the conditional antecedent, the *-myen* clause, in Korean is much more restricted. No instance of the *-myen* clause in the final position was observed in the written corpus (0/647) and only 3 instances in the spoken corpus (3/97). Lee interpreted this fact as showing that unlike English, the option of placing the conditional antecedent in the final position is basically disallowed in Korean grammar. In other words, such an option is syntactically unacceptable since Korean is strictly a head-final language. Lee argued that in English, placing the conditional antecedent in the final position is syntactically available, and the speaker can sometimes take advantage of this option driven by discourse factors as pointed out in this section, whereas no such syntactic option is allowed in Korean and therefore the speaker has no choice but to keep this syntactic requirement before worrying about what kind of discourse structure to build up. He further noted that this contrastive fact between English and Korean well demonstrates the general fact that the sentence grammar has a priority over the discourse grammar; that is, only within the syntactically available options is the speaker allowed to maneuver the discourse structure.

Ford and Thompson (1986) noticed that, in the above passage, the subject of the consequent *the Soviet government* is being compared with the preceding mention of *the French revolution*. This comparison is most effective if the compared items both appear in main clauses. This seemed to necessitate postponing a conditional clause which might otherwise appear in initial position.

I basically agree with Ford and Thompson in that the final conditional clause is motivated when a factor such as comparative focus is considered by the speaker. Here we have to address a more fundamental question of why such a factor motivates the speaker to choose this marked clause order of conditionals; that is, is there any underlying discourse principle that motivates the speaker to choose to shift the conditional clause to the final position? In the following discussions, we argue that we can indeed find a general discourse principle that underlies the motivation.

4.2. *If*-clauses and Inferential Links

Toward identifying the underlying discourse factor, let us consider the corpus data of written English drawn from the New Testament. First, consider (22) below.

(22) (Hebrew 3 : 6)

But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are **his house**, *if* we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

Notice in (22) that the NP expression *his house* is a discourse-old entity since it (God's house) was already evoked in the preceding context. In contrast, the information status of the *if*-clause is discourse-new and hearer-new because the content of the *if*-clause was never evoked in the previous context and the speaker cannot assume that the hearer already knows it at the time of utterance. In this information structure, the speaker/writer is led to keep the discourse-old link by placing the *if*-clause (NEW information) in the final position. The *if*-clause is pushed back to the final position because something in the main clause instead makes an inferential link (the discourse-old link in this case) with the preceding context.

The following examples illustrate the similar line of motivation by the speaker/writer. Consider (23) and (24).

(23) (Luke 23 : 35)

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; **let him save himself**, *if* he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."

(24) (Galatians. 6 : 9)

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will **reap a harvest**, *if* we do not give up.

In (23), the main clause expression *let him save himself* describes a contrastive situation with the preceding expression *he saved others* and thus there is an inferential link (the INFERRABLE link through *contrast*) between them. Similarly, in (24), the VP expression *reap a harvest* exemplifies an earlier general expression *doing good* in the preceding context and thus there is also an inferential link (the INFERRABLE link through *exemplification*) between them. The information status of each *if*-clause is, however, discourse-new and hearer-new for the same reason as in (22). Then, the speaker/writer is motivated to push the *if*-clauses back to the final position in these two examples to create the information structure of the INFERRABLE-NEW ordering rather than the NEW-INFERRABLE ordering.

The discussion of this set of data from the written corpus in English conditionals suggests that the choice of clause order in conditionals is determined by the speaker's motivated strategy of communication that is universal in discourse structure; that is, to put something GIVEN(OLD) or INFERRABLE before something NEW. This makes the flow of discourse smooth by making it possible to avoid a rough shift. Under this strategy, the *if*-clauses are pushed back to the final position when something in the main clause makes an inferential link with the preceding context as carrying the discourse-old or INFERRABLE information. Putting this strategy into other words, we find that the choice of clause order in conditionals is determined by what kind of inferential role they have in a local discourse structure.

5. Closing Remarks

In this paper, we argued against Haiman's (1978) claim and presented sufficient evidence to show that conditionals are not simply topics (GIVEN information). The analysis of information status of English *if*-clauses in natural discourse showed that conditionals should be viewed as carrying the NEW or INFERRABLE information as well as the GIVEN information (in the sense defined in Prince (1992)). The important thing we noticed in a local discourse structure of conditionals was that the *if*-clauses play an important role in making an inferential link by carrying either the discourse-old or the INFERRABLE information. We found that there exist various kinds of INFERRABLE information established between the *if*-clause and some entity evoked in the preceding context due to a logical reasoning or through the bridge of conversational implicature.

Then, we shifted our attention to whether the information status of the conditional clause is related to the speaker's choice of clause order in English conditionals. We observed that the speaker's choice of clause order in English conditionals is closely related to the information status of the conditional antecedent in a local discourse context. The choice of clause order in conditionals was determined by what kind of inferential role they have in a local discourse structure. We observed that the speaker is motivated to shift the conditional antecedent to the final position when something in the main clause makes an inferential link with the preceding context as carrying the discourse-old or INFERRABLE information. This motivation stems from a more general discourse principle of making the transition of discourse flow smooth by putting something GIVEN or INFERRABLE before something NEW.

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ABSTRACT

The Information Status of English *If*-clauses in Natural Discourse

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This paper aims to understand the discourse function of conditionals by analyzing the information structure of conditional sentences in natural discourse under the framework of the so-called GIVEN-NEW taxonomy as presented in Prince (1992). In doing so, we argue against Haiman's (1978) claim and present sufficient evidence to show that conditionals are not simply topics (GIVEN information). The analysis of information status of English *if*-clauses in natural discourse shows that conditionals should be viewed as carrying the NEW or INFERRABLE information as well as the GIVEN information (in the sense defined in Prince (1992)). We observe that there exist various kinds of INFERRABLE information established between the *if*-clause and some entity evoked in the preceding context due to a logical reasoning or through the bridge of conversational implicature. Along with these findings, we turn our attention to whether the information status of the conditional clause is related to the speaker's choice of clause order in English conditionals. We observe that the speaker's choice of clause order in English conditionals is closely related to the information status of the conditional antecedent in a local discourse context. The choice of clause order in conditionals is determined by what kind of inferential role they have in a local discourse structure. In particular, the speaker is motivated to shift the *if*-clause to the final position when something in the main clause makes an inferential link with the preceding context as carrying the discourse-old or INFERRABLE information. We further note that this motivation stems from a more general discourse principle of making the transition of discourse flow smooth by putting something GIVEN or INFERRABLE prior to introducing something NEW.

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